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SUBJECT: RELIGION IN SENEGAL-THE SHIA

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Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY DCM JAY T. SMITH FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

1.(C) SUMMARY: This is the fourth in a series of cables analyzing religion in Senegal. This cable is about the Shia.

While the number of people who identify themselves as Shia Muslims may be small in number, they wield an outsize influence in the country's economic landscape due to the prosperity of the predominantly Shia Lebanese community. Furthermore, of all of Senegal's various religious denominations it is perhaps the Shia who have the most international connections; connections which stretch deep into Lebanon and Iran as well as with Hezbollah. There are a small number of Senegalese who profess to be Shia. End Summary.

By the Numbers

12. (C) According to Cheikh Abdul Monem el-Zein, the spiritual leader of the Lebanese Shia community who has been here since June 1969, there are approximately 25-30,000 Lebanese living in Senegal, mostly in Dakar. This community dates back to the 1880's. The 64 year old Zein estimates that 90 percent are Shia with the remaining 10 percent Maronites. As for the Senegalese Shia, Imam Ibrahima Thiam, the Imam of the Shia mosque in the Pompiers district of Dakar, estimates that there are no more than 5,000 throughout the country. Imam Thiam, whose mosque was built by the wealthy Lebanese businessman Ibrahim Derwish in 1986, commented that even though it was the Lebanese Shia, including Zein, that trained him and five of his colleagues back in the 1970's the two communities seldom interact with another even though they share the same faith. He wryly added that the Lebanese were very reserved and did not wish to intermingle with the Senegalese very much.

The Roots

13. (C) Zein, who received his introduction to religion in a Sunni institution after having attended Catholic middle school, informed us that the first three generations of Lebanese were just interested in working to take care of their families as they had originally left Lebanon to get away from poverty. Now the fourth and fifth generations are doctors, lawyers and businessmen. He added that apart from a handful, they are not active in local politics. It is rumored that many remit money or support Hezbollah as a matter of course. For his part, Imam Thiam said that the Senegalese Shia community had its genesis in Senegal in the early 70's but that it was the Iranian revolution and the "charismatic figure" of Ayatollah Khomeini that kindled the

curiosity of Senegalese intellectuals who began to read and research the Shia movement. Today his mosque has 100 regular congregants; although about 3,000, mostly Sunnis, attend Friday prayers. He added that several hundred Senegalese students either are studying or have studied in Lebanon and Iran—mostly in Qom.

The Philosophy

¶4. (C) Cheikh Zein, whose personal influence on the Shia community is reportedly waning somewhat, underlined that the relationship between the various religious groups in Senegal have been and remain peaceful, "All political leaders come and see me. Whenever religious groups have any major event I am invited. We have no quarrels with anybody. I am sincere when I say that my goal is to help both Senegal and Lebanon."

He then admonished the United States, "The US should not approach religion by focusing on the differences between the religious rituals or traditions of various religious groups. Such a negative approach is destructive. Anyway these differences are tiny and really a matter of perspective; in essence not much separates us from the Sunnis. Attempts to highlight those differences are what have lead to the current conflicts between these two strains of Islam." Thiam is more pragmatic, "I fear the growth of Wahhabism in Senegal. It hurts us when they accuse us of being non-Muslims. They are always tense and lack spiritual peace of mind because they are so intolerant of other religious viewpoints."

Iraq

¶5. (C) Thiam said, "By the grace of God the US is the most powerful nation on earth and had a mission to eliminate a

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microbe called Saddam Hussein. Now that that mission has been accomplished you have to withdraw, otherwise there will never be peace as you will always be seen as a colonial occupier. The US has tried a lot of things in Iraq and failed perhaps now the time has come to try withdrawal. Of course the US must keep an eye on Iraq but the Iraqis need to be given an opportunity to see whether or not they can run their own country."

Comment

¶6. (C) If it were not for ties to Hezbollah and Iran, coupled with the prosperity of the Lebanese, the Shia community in Senegal would barely register on the country's religious radar and yet it is for these reasons that this group needs to be monitored more than, say the Wahhabi or the Salafists. While their numbers are small, and they try to keep out of the limelight it is known that a small number of wealthy and influential Lebanese have links, especially financial, to Hezbollah and that many more in the community contribute money out of a need to show fealty to the homeland. Meanwhile, some young Senegalese Shia continue to receive religious training in places like Iran, thus increasing that country's influence within the local community's affairs. End Comment

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